

SAINT MARY'S SCHOOL

Alumnae Profile Series

by Lauren E. Gerber

Winston Cobb Green '71C

**Co-Owner, LaHart Properties LLC
Lynchburg, Va.**

Value What's Valuable

Native Virginian Winston Cobb Green '71C is an experienced business owner who began a career in technology during the mid-to-late 1970s, when unemployment was high and professions for women were often limited. Through perseverance, faith in God, and determination and strength, she found success, built a family and business, and discovered who she was meant to be.

From Virginia to Saint Mary's

Winston has fond memories of her time in junior college at 900 Hillsborough Street and sometimes wishes she'd been a four-year-girl.

"Back then, people didn't stress over college like they do today," she explains. "I had a best friend who was a year ahead of me who went to Saint Mary's, and I went to visit her on campus one weekend. I loved Raleigh, was interested in going to a women's college, and so I thought Saint Mary's would be just fine. I also applied to Peace College, which was also in Raleigh."

Peace sent her an acceptance letter rather quickly, but she heard nothing from Saint Mary's.

"So, I called!" she says and laughs. "I told them I'd already been accepted at Peace College and asked what the decision was from Saint Mary's and when would I hear."

Very quickly (later that week!), an official acceptance letter arrived from Saint Mary's and the decision was made.

Reflecting on her time as a student, Winston recalls a fondness for Mr. Tate, her English teacher.

"One day, Mr. Tate mentioned his friendship with Dr. Isaac Taylor, the dean of UNC Chapel Hill's medical school, who happened to be the father of one of my favorite musicians, James Taylor. Mr. Tate told us he was friends with Dr. Taylor and then shared an interesting story with us. James and his brother Livingston, who was also a musician, were living in the treehouse in the family's backyard. Apparently, they had an unusual upbringing!"

Winston also recalls the supportive environment of Saint Mary's and the comradery between the young women attending the school, how connected and supportive the girls were of each other.

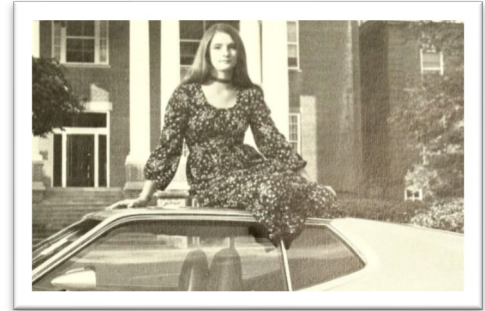
"I felt safe taking chances and risks, even breaking a few innocuous rules, because we knew it was a



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safe environment to do so," she says. "As young women in our formative years, we built the most special bond between us. We weren't worried about competing with each other and we weren't distracted by boys in the classroom. Instead, it was a place where we transitioned into greater independence."

While at Saint Mary's, Winston participated in Sigma Mu intramural sports activities. She also appeared in her senior yearbook on top of a car in front of Smedes Hall. (See image to the right.)



But, the most important outcome from those days resulted in the lifelong friendships she made.

"To this day, we continue to get together," she says. "In fact, my friends Susan Carroll Alexander '71C, Mollie Bridger Vandiver '71C, Jane Moore Lazarus '71C, and I recently reconnected with Beth Franz '71C through Facebook. We hadn't seen or heard from her in over 40 years!"



Winston, Susan, Mollie, Jane, and Beth

Since graduation, Susan, Mollie, Jane, and Winston have stayed connected, and then last year all five women got together when they invited Beth to join them.

Over the years, Winston shared that she's seen Mollie the most, and Susan often hosts mini reunion gatherings in her home in Raleigh for them. Their class secretary, Betty Anne Queen Bush '71C, shares reports of "The Four" when Winston or others send in news of their gatherings and recently shared the reunion with Beth.



Beth, Susan, Mollie, Jane, and Winston

"Our class has been very good about coming back for reunions, and we are really looking forward to our 50th," she says.

Winston is also excited because her best friend who was one year ahead of her (and the reason she came to Saint Mary's) graduated in the Class of 1970C.

"It should be a really cool time because the classes ending in 0s and 5s are being included along with those of us in the 1s and 6s. It will be an even bigger and better reunion."

Beyond the Gates

After Saint Mary's, Winston didn't transfer to UNC-CH like so many of her classmates. Instead, she decided to do something different. "I wanted to go to a big school, somewhere in the south, that had a good football team. I obviously wasn't overly focused on academics at that time," she says and laughs. "First, I looked at Ole Miss and the University of Florida, and then I settled on the University of Georgia (UGA) – their colors were better. Red and black!"

In a more serious tone, Winston explains her decision of a major. "At the time, we knew there was a tendency for women (and men) to 'go into the family business'. My own mother was a teacher and my father a salesman. At first, I thought 'I'll just go into education.' But then I realized I didn't really want to."

Instead, she decided to major in Political Science with an emphasis on political philosophy. After two years, she graduated with her bachelor's degree.

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"When I got out, I suddenly realized it was about 'who is going to pay the bills'? I was never a person who just knew what I wanted my career to be. Some people just know they want to be a lawyer, a nurse, a doctor; but I wanted a Liberal Ed education."

Winston says there are both benefits and challenges with that decision, which she found after graduation. "Lib-Ed colleges and universities allow the student to get an education, express themselves, discover and find their self-confidence. There are significant benefits for a student who doesn't have a specific career in mind because they can explore many options. They aren't pigeonholed because they've just spent four years in a major. However, because there is no set path, it's tougher to get going after graduation. Luckily it worked out for me."

After graduating from UGA, Winston hoped to find a job in Atlanta, just over an hour from Athens, Ga., where UGA was located. Early in her search, she decided to instead pursue certification as a paralegal.

"I relocated to Pennsylvania and attended The Institute for Paralegal Training in Philadelphia."

There, she chose corporate law – a focus that she soon discovered was very "dry." One of Winston's academic counselors met with her and offered that it probably was not the profession her personality was suited for.

"I mean, it wasn't Perry Mason!" she says and laughs. "I agreed and returned home to Lynchburg."

Embracing Change; Overcoming Fear

Arriving back in Virginia, Winston moved back with her parents and then asked her father to help her find a job. Having grown up in the Tidewater region of Virginia, which includes the land east of the Fall Line, the natural border with the Piedmont Region, Mr. Cobb reached out to a friend, Mills Goldwin, who was the governor of the State of Virginia at the time.

"Daddy called *the Governor!*" she says and shakes her head.

That call was made during the 1970s recession, which spanned from 1973-1975. An oil crisis in 1973 and the 1973-74 stock market crash had an enormous impact on the U.S. economy, making it even tougher for young women to find work, especially when men were also out of work.

"He must not have had a lot of pull," Winston says and laughs. "He got me a temporary position at the Virginia Employment Commission taking unemployment claims. It was a stressful time for everyone and there were a lot of people out of work. The waiting room was packed. And, every person had a terrible story about what they were going through. I'd come home every night just wilted. The veteran staff members would say, 'Just wait. You'll learn not to be so emotionally involved.' They were right. I had to keep myself going."

The position eventually evolved into a permanent job working in a new Work Incentive Now (WIN) program for women with children. "We would aid women with dependents to get them into the workforce. It was so much more difficult because men were often given preference, and there were only so many jobs for women."

That's when life began to change.

"I met my future husband, Roger. He was working as a manager for the data processing division for the City of Lynchburg."

The couple began dating when Winston was 26. Roger had been married previously and had two children from that relationship.

"When we started dating, I told him, 'I just want to let you know something; I don't date *anyone* more than a year, because if you don't know where you're going in a year, you're not going anywhere," she

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recalls and laughs heartily. "About 11 months to the day, he popped the question and we got married."

The couple bought a house, and Winston had an immediate family. Soon, there would be even more change.

"Roger always had an entrepreneurial spirit in him and working for the government can break that spirit. That's because you look around and people aren't working at that entrepreneurial level. It can be hard, so he started looking for a job. Then, one night he came home from Richmond. I took one look at his face and said, 'You found it!' and he said "Yes!' and we were on our way as tech-business owners."

At the time, businesses, governments, had big computer banks that would fill large, airconditioned rooms. As the microprocessor was invented in 1972, the power of computers increased, while their size again diminished substantially. With processing now situated within a very small chip, personal computers could be developed and made available to the public. For the first time, computers themselves became a product that could be sold to the masses. IBM was the first to capitalize on this, producing its IBM PC in 1981, and innovators such as Steve Jobs followed suit with the creation of Apple Computer and its subsequent "Macintosh" line.

"After connecting with a group who had a microcomputer for small businesses and individuals available, he started our business and called it Benchmark Systems. I came into the business after about three months," she explains. "We built it from the ground up. There were only the two of us in the beginning and a guy we hired to do installation and repairs."

Self-described as Right Brain-dominant, Winston says the business and her future role was the exact opposite of her natural skills.

"I didn't like accounting, math, or anything analytical, but I had to learn how to be left-brained and do processing and accounting on the computer. I learned about accounting practices. How? Roger asked if I knew anything about debit or credit...typical personal banking stuff... When I started to describe it, he said... 'Um no!' So, I learned!"

In fact, Winston became responsible for training end-users of the Benchmark System computers.

"Over time, we evolved and refined our customer base, and we ended up specializing with certain industries. I initially worked with construction companies, and the large burly men they sent to be trained who wanted things their way. Later, we further focused on computers for medical use."

At each turn, Winston embraced the challenges and opportunities alongside Roger, but it wasn't without fear or doubt.

"I remember gripping fear the first time I had to do a training class on General Ledger. I had this vague sense of what this kind of accounting was about, but I knew the data (computer) system and had to teach them. But, here in this room were these women with years and years of experience as bookkeepers, office managers, payroll managers, and I had to teach them?! They knew ten times what I did, but they didn't know *how* to do it on the computer. I remember feeling this cold tightness in my chest. I finally got through that, and then I'd done it. I learned it, got to be a lot better at training."

Winston believes that's a key mantra for adapting to change and obstacles. "For young women in high school and college, or early in their career, I want them to know they should push through that fear or obstacle. The bottom line is you *can* do it; all you need is opportunity and enough experience. You'll learn and grow as you accept that fear and carry on in spite of it."

Winston also explains that challenges weren't just business related, and the early years of their firm weren't just about business.

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"That's because when we married, very shortly thereafter, Roger's oldest daughter came to live with us. She was fourteen, and her little brother was seven years younger."

Eventually, both children would live with them.

"I now had a new marriage, a new house, an instant family with two children – one of whom was a teenage girl and all that this entails. And, we also had this new business, which I was helping run and grow. On top of learning new skills and training customers and clients, I was learning how to be step-mother and wife."

Many times, even greater challenges arose. There were times payroll was tight and the weight of responsibility could be heavy.

"We had to pay our employees. And, when we didn't have enough to meet payroll and pay ourselves, we didn't. We paid them. We went without. It was important to do so, but it was stressful."

Roger's father had a Dale Carnegie franchise and had grown up around that mindset. When times became difficult for them financially, Winston signed up and took a Dale Carnegie course.

"One thing I learned was what you do in a situation like facing the potential loss of business or bankruptcy. You take the worst case scenario, the worst outcome, and then you make a plan for that. Then, you plan for what to do next, which helped us move forward and be successful. One of the most gratifying things about our business was providing a living wage for employees."

Over the years, the business grew. The boom of the Internet also propelled the company forward. In fact, Benchmark became known as one of the leading cloud-based healthcare application services providers in the U.S. In reflecting on those years, Winston says that one of the hardest things was hiring the right people.

"I tried to be a mentor, to introduce new hires into our culture at work, how to do the best job, and the result was that we built lifetime relationships with so many over the years."

At the same time, they also dabbled in property management.

"Roger owned the building where our business was housed. Across the street was Section-8 housing and a lot of crime was occurring in the rundown buildings. So, Roger decided to purchase the property and rehab them."

They also acquired other downtown properties – all the time running Benchmark. In 2011, Roger retired as president of the company, though he remained as chairman of the board. Then, in 2015, the couple made the decision to sell the business to a tech startup called AntWorks. They also had several properties they were invested in across town.

"So, I said to Roger, 'Now that we've sold the company and the employees are no longer working for us, who is going to manage all this?' That's when our new venture, LaHart Properties LLC was born."

Today, both Winston and Roger continue working in property management, investment, and sales. Outside of work, the duo enjoys football, friends, and family. They have had season tickets to UGA football for decades and go to all home games, a home in Hilton Head where they enjoy summers, holidays, and other life events (which is currently undergoing a renovation), and they've traveled to places like Alaska, Hawaii, and Europe.

Winston herself played tennis and grew up watching the United States Tennis Association (USTA) tournament in Lynchburg, which spurred a later interest in her adult life.

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"As a kid, I would often sit next to the USTA referee because I thought his job was interesting. Later, I realized I wanted to become a USTA official, so I set my mind to it, took the classes, became one."

Winston was excited to referee several types of matches. "I did a lot of different things – juniors, calling professional lines, but what I liked the best was men's Division I Tennis matches. I was really excited to officiate UVA matches as a chair umpire during the time they were winning national championships. I refereed both doubles and singles matches. It was good to be the boss!"

No matter what life put in Winston's path – opportunities or challenges – her determination, spirit, and resilience propelled her to move forward to find success.

"Tough times are character builders," she says. "Students and young professionals need to know it's okay to 'power through' those moments of fear. But, make people think it's not your first rodeo. Be open to changing your major or take a job that's not quite the right fit but gets you through and pays the bills while you build skills and your network."

She also says that when it comes to choosing a college major and potential career, if you're someone without a specific calling – like a doctor, nurse, lawyer, teacher, etc. – then, "Don't declare for your first two years, if you don't have to. Spend the first two years experiencing and being exposed to many different areas. Dabble in enough courses to see what excites you. What do you love to go to class for? And not just because of the teacher! Get out and don't turn down a job because you never saw yourself doing that or it's not the perfect job you wanted."

Winston explains this sentiment further. "You never know what door opens when you take a risk or a chance or move in a different direction. Your talents may be underdeveloped, hidden. But you *can* put them out there for all to see. Lend some creativity to your job, branch out, build skills. You've got to get a work history and show you are dependable. So, commit to the job. If you're a server, a barista, work in retail, etc., then be the best at that job. Your career will unfold as your experience and skills build and as you meet people. Get to know yourself and know where you fit, what bring joy to your life."

She also says, "There won't always be joy. So, build coping mechanisms, there is no cocoon to hide in. You have to learn to move through any fear, doubt, or tough stuff. It's the journey that matters and can lead to a pivot in your life for the better. That's when the best things happen."

Know What Matters

Roger and Winston have been married for several decades now. In reflecting on how to sustain a marriage with a blended family, new businesses, adventure, stress and joy, she says that when someone is thinking about committing their life to another person, they should realize it's a holy sacrament and not just a different stage of life that can be run from. In that way, her advice is similar advice to that she gives about college and career decisions.

"I really think you can tell by the wedding where a person's priority is. Is the focus on the marriage? Or is it about throwing a big party – the perfect event? This is a big, lifetime commitment. This is a holy sacrament. You'll have ruts, good and bad, challenges, joys, and major ups and downs. If you turn tail and run at the first sign of trouble, you'll never have that stable relationship."

When Roger and Winston began dating, like many young women in love, she asked, 'Who do you love the most?' She says she could've gotten upset at his answer when he said, "I love God, I love you and my children, and my parents. But God is first."

Initially she wondered why *she* wasn't first, but that propelled her to deeper reflection.

"Of course, I *can* be number two to God! I'm not the center of the universe. And, I can't always have it

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my way. In marriage, there is compromise and growth. There is something to the struggle and building something together. I would also say, know what's *really* valuable. So, when it comes to a wedding, put that money toward a house. It's the place you'll start your life together. Build a foundation you can grow on. Self-reflect on where your priorities are at and why you're entering into this commitment."

Today, Winston is involved in her community beyond being a business owner. She's an active member in the First Presbyterian Church of Lynchburg and a former elder. She's also a generous donor to various nonprofits in the community, and a longtime, consistent contributor to Saint Mary's Annual Fund. She also keeps in touch with her Saint Mary's friends, attends reunions and events, and stays up to date on current happenings at 900 Hillsborough Street.

Saint Mary's alumnae like Winston Cobb Green '71C graduate with the skills, knowledge, and integrity they need for success. Whether furthering their education, pursuing professional careers, raising families, or leading as volunteers, our alumnae are agents for positive change in their communities. Winston's story demonstrates the ability Saint Mary's women have to do big things with their lives, and we know she will inspire many Saint Mary's girls of today to go after their dreams. We're thrilled to share her story!

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